Serial Killers - Nature vs. Nurture

forensic psychology (Sheffield Hallam University)

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Serial Killers

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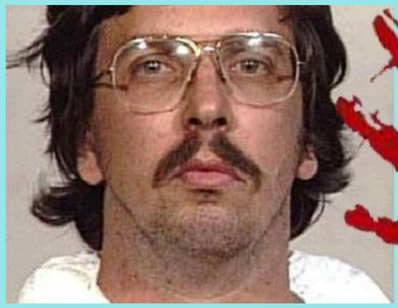

Genetics

Many people believe that the actions of a serial killer are simply too shocking to be excused for bad upbringing and cultural influences. Such behaviour is therefore argued to be caused by an **abnormality** or **evil gene** which leads to violent killing behaviour (Brown, 2003).

It is argued that serial killers act remarkably different to their siblings. Mrsclemens (2018) notes that Ted Bundy's mum noticed that her son Ted acted in a bizarre way from a young age. One night she saw Ted sneaking off into his teenage aunt's room placing knives under her covers. He stood and grinned.

Bad seeds are said to blossom in bad environments and there's lots of research which suggests that **genetics** to play a part in violent and murderous behaviour (Mrsclemens, 2018). There are 6 potential biological aspects which determine whether someone is a serial killer. These include **extra chromosomes**, heavy metals, brain defects, high levels of testosterone, **sensory deprivation** and **absence of fear** (Pokel, 2000).

Brain defects

It is also believed that chemical imbalances can cause violent behaviour. This can be a result of **brain trauma**, **ingesting drugs and alcohol** and **glandular dysfunctions** (Newton, 2006).

Testosterone

High levels of testosterone results in behaviour which is more aggressive (Morana, Stone and Abdalla-filho, 2006).

Johnson and Becker (1997) conducted a study on 9 clinical cases of 14-18 year olds who often fantasized of being a serial killer. The study found that these males did in fact have **higher testosterone** levels than average.

One disadvantage with this study though is that the results don't actually prove anything. It would be a good idea to conduct a follow up study in around 50 years time to see if any of the participants went on to be serial killers.

Heavy metals

Research has shown that some serial killers have significantly higher levels of **toxic metals in their system**. Proving this point, it was discovered that serial killer James Huberty had large amounts of cadmium in his system (Pokel, 2000).

What does a serial killer look like?

We all have our own preconceived idea of what a serial killer looks like whether that's from movies we have seen, stories we've read in the news or what we've learnt at school. Although his theories have been debunked, Lombroso offers an interesting idea of what a serial killer looks like.

Lombroso's research found that their skulls were smaller and more deformed compared to the rest of the population, they were **taller**, had a **stockier** build and had **light beards** (Gibson and Rafter, 2006). They were also believed to have **sloping foreheads**, **protruding jaws**, **crooked noses**, **large ears** and **dark eyes and hair** (Gibson and Rafter, 2006). Eclectic scientist Lombroso also considered serial killers to be **physically weak** and **insensitive to pain**.

Race

Statistics reveal that ethnic minorities are underrepresented. This fact tends to be overlooked when it comes to research (Pokel, 2000).

Fox and Levin (2005) conducted a study where data from 558 offenders was analysed aiming to see if race had an impact on determining whether someone becomes a serial killer or not. They discovered that 86% of killers were male, 82% were white, 15% were black and 4% were Hispanic. This concludes that **white males** are more likely to become serial killers.

Final thoughts…

It is clear to see that nurture is the main factor in the creation of a serial killer. Nature is significant but nobody is truly born evil. Traumatic events play a key part in turning a person evil as well as being brought up in an unhappy household which results in developing closed off and distant personalities. Being closed off from the world causes resentment to humanity which makes it easier for them to kill.

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Childhood abuse

Many studies have claimed that a serial killers behaviour is due to their poor upbringing. Many notorious serial killers have been victims of child abuse which has often been carried out by their parents. These types of abuse include **sexual abuse**, **psychological abuse**, **physical abuse** and **neglect**. Evidence does show however that not all those who come from an abusive home go on to commit murder (Guy, 2015). Studies have shown that there is a high correlation between child trauma and criminal activity in adulthood (Guy, 2015).

FBI findings propose that 42% of serial killers have been a victim of physical abuse as a child, 43% have been sexually abused and a huge 74% were exposed to ongoing psychological torture (Schechter and Everitt, 2006).

In addition these FBI findings, Mitchell and Aamodt (2005) also conducted a study to determine the frequency of childhood abuse in serial killers. Their research consisted of analysing information found about each serial killer and their past using biographies, newspaper articles and websites. They categorised four types of abuse: physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse and neglect (Mitchell and Aamodt, 2005).

After analysing all of the data and comparing it to the rest of the population, Mitchell and Aamodt (2005) discovered that 26% suffered from sexual abuse, 36% were physically abused and 50% dealt with psychological abuse. Neglect was the same for both the general population and serial killer population. They concluded that a staggering 68% of **serial killers suffered from some form of maltreatment whilst growing up**. It is arguable that this number could be higher as findings may be under reported.

Violent games

The environment determines who a person is and who they become. Many studies have linked violent video games to violent and even murderous tendencies. Research has indicated many times that serial killers have an **addiction to violent video games**.

Adam Lanza shot and killed 20 students from Sandy Hook Elementary School. Before carrying out this horrific mass murder, he is said to have been a regular player of violent shooting games (Charisma news, 2015).

To support the claims of playing violent video games linking to mass murder, Anderson, Funk and Griffiths (2004) conducted a study which included 607 participants from the 8th and 9th grade across 4 schools. This study concluded that those who were exposed to more video game violence were more aggressive, got into arguments with teachers and peers more often and had a higher chance of being involved in physical fights.

Bullying and social isolation

From many serial killer cases, it's understood that they were **regularly bullied** as children and young adults. A study by Vronsky (2005) found that 71% of murderers that analysed experienced "a sense of **isolation in their childhood**" and 77% experienced this in adolescence. It is thought that this social isolation creates a serial killer in the making. The social isolation makes them construct a fantasy world where they act out 'murder fantasies' on animals and bully their peers (Vronsky, 2005).

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